

SZÁZADVÉG

Ladies and gentlemen, distinguished guests, esteemed speakers, colleagues and friends,

It is my honour to welcome you today to our conference “*What is going on? The Western World and Politics After Liberalism*”. I am delighted to see so many distinguished minds gathered here to reflect on one of the defining political and intellectual transformations of our era. Your presence here signals something important: that even in times of uncertainty, there remains a strong commitment to serious thought, open debate, and intellectual responsibility.

For more than three decades, Századvég has been committed to a simple yet demanding mission: to conduct research and polls, provide wide-ranging analysis, carry out policy research, and serve as a bridge between policymakers and the voice of the people. Our aim has always been to contribute to an intellectually honest dialogue about the forces shaping our societies. In the early years, Századvég focused primarily on socio-political research, while also operating a political school led by our colleagues. Since its foundation, it has also run a publishing house that produces books reflecting a conservative value framework, including works addressing socio-political topics.



However, since 2010 we have broadened our scope to deepen the understanding of economic, social, and geopolitical processes - helping decision-makers and citizens navigate complexity with greater clarity. Yet our mission has remained the same. Our responsibility is to bring clarity to an increasingly complex world - especially in times of rapid change, when sound decisions depend on reliable information.

Today's conference is a natural continuation of that mission. Because moments of change demand understanding; and understanding begins with asking the right questions. Perhaps even more importantly, with the willingness to reconsider answers that once seemed self-evident.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the liberal era was greeted with enormous enthusiasm. Many believed that liberal democracy could deliver equality, freedom, prosperity, and peace all at once, and that it represented not just one model among many, but the endpoint of political development. For a time, it appeared that ideological contestation had given way to consensus, and that the path of history had become predictable.

Today, however, it is clear that we are living in a period of profound transformation: a time when something old is fading and something new is emerging.



It is important to emphasize that this large-scale transformation was foreseeable to those who view politics and the world through the lens of realism and practical considerations. Leading realist thinkers such as John J. Mearsheimer had already, at an early stage, drawn the attention of global political actors to the fact that the so-called unipolar world order - from which the idolized global liberalism emerged - was coming to an end. Moreover, the global crises of recent decades have ominously signalled to the old elites that irreversible developments had been set in motion worldwide, fundamentally reshaping truths once believed to be stable.

By now, not only we Europeans, but citizens across the Western world as a whole have experienced these transformations firsthand.



This tectonic shift was perhaps best summarized by the aforementioned thinker, Mearsheimer, in his highly successful book, which was also published in Hungarian in 2022 by Századvég under the title *The Great Delusion – Liberal Dreams and International Realities*. As he writes, “*The structure of the international system is anarchic, not hierarchical, which means that liberalism applied to international politics cannot work. States therefore have no choice but to act according to the logic of the balance of power if they wish to survive.*” It should be noted that this far-reaching transformation has not only international but, naturally, domestic political dimensions as well. And what once seemed like a theoretical warning has, over time, become a political reality.

Perhaps the first signal of this major shift was the global financial crisis of 2008. It was followed by political turning points such as the first election of Donald Trump or Brexit. Not only has the former international status quo begun to fragment, but societies are increasingly searching for new paths within their own borders. The old models no longer seem capable of providing convincing answers. Trust in institutions has weakened, political landscapes have become more fragmented, and voters across democracies are expressing a growing demand for responsiveness, security, and sovereignty.



The global era of liberal democracy promised the simultaneous realization of equality, freedom, prosperity, and peace. Over time, it has become evident not only that these ideals can conflict with one another, but also that the system has struggled to guarantee them even individually. Over the years, we've learned that progress doesn't just happen on its own: it needs attention, effort, and care to keep moving forward.

Across parts of the Western world - *particularly in Western Europe* - freedom of speech has come under growing pressure. The financial crisis demonstrated the limits of a dogmatic belief in self-regulating markets, as promised prosperity could disappear almost overnight. And peace has become increasingly fragile, challenged domestically by migration-related tensions and internationally by the Russia–Ukraine war. Overall, liberal democracy has struggled to fulfil its grand promises. Acknowledging these challenges isn't defeatism; it's simply the first step toward thinking more clearly and looking ahead with purpose.

The purpose of today's conference is therefore not only to offer a diagnosis, but to reflect together on what comes next. What might replace liberalism? What will a post-liberal era look like? And how might politics evolve - both within countries and between them?



These are the questions our distinguished international and domestic speakers will explore throughout the day. While we may not leave with definitive answers, we hope to outline at least some of the possibilities ahead. If today succeeds in sharpening our questions and broadening our perspectives, it will already have achieved something of lasting value.

Thank you for joining us today and for contributing your expertise to this important conversation. I would especially like to express my sincere appreciation to our distinguished speakers for accepting our invitation and for honouring us with their presence. Your willingness to share your knowledge and perspectives is what makes this gathering truly valuable.

I wish you a productive conference filled with rigorous debate and forward-looking ideas.

May today's discussions not only interpret the changes around us but also help us navigate them with greater confidence and insight.

